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SUPER STUPOR?

Trend spotter sees stores as anti-consumer . . .

By Steven Pratt
Chicago Tribune

"Supermarkets are in trouble," writes contemporary soothsayer Faith Popcorn in her recent book "The Popcorn Report" (Doubleday, $22.50).

She wastes no time, minces no words. The "prototypical American marketplace must transform itself into the prototypical future marketplace in order to survive. There is little about the American supermarket that is worth prolonging into the future."

As the chairman of BrainReserve Inc., a New York trend analysis and consulting firm, Popcorn makes her living by assessing the present and using that assessment to predict the future. Her book is an attempt to explain her method, which she describes with elan, even inventing her own vocabulary and set of principles.

Those principles, when applied to the conventional supermarket, find it wanting, she writes. Briefly, here's how Popcorn sees present stores based on her 10 basic trends for the future:

The atmosphere of the supermarket is the opposite of serenity, she writes, with shopping carts clashing and lights blaring. A big burden to the consumer, the stores are mundane with no personal service or recognition of individual needs, loaded with stress and a minefield of temptation. They are places in which no one seems to care about the consumers as they wade through a manipulative maze, a hassle right down to wheeling your cart out to your car, unloading it alone and then returning it to the store.

"To put it bluntly," she writes, "consumers feel supermarkets are in cahoots with the manufacturers, to fool us, to pull the wool over our eyes, to make a buck. They are not on the consumer's side. And that's 'off trend,' " she writes using one of her coined terms.

Before you write her off as some meddling malcontent, realize that BrainReserve lists among its clients IBM, American Express, Philip Morris, Campbell Soup, Pillsbury, Procter & Gamble and Polaroid.

Like any seer or shaman, to the extent she is right in her portents, she will be successful in business. To companies prepared to meet consumer and business trends just as they occur, her advice is worth millions.

The process Popcorn and her firm go through is not so mysterious, she said. Basically, they analyze a product or service and apply it to their established set of trends. The extent to which the product (or service) conforms to those trends and their implications is the extent to which Popcorn predicts it will occupy a successful place in the future.

What will that future be like for the supermarket industry? Will there be a future? How should it prepare?

One solution to the predicted dilemma, she suggests in her book, is for the supermarket to become totally computerized. Consumers wouldn't need to leave their homes to stroll the aisles, make selections and spend their credit. This would take place through new electronic technology allowing shoppers to interact closely with their computers and television sets. To accept this solution one should imagine that shoppers not only see a selection of particular products but also have access to detailed information on how they are made and where products come from.

"Point your finger toward Marrakech or Jamaica to look at the markets your spices come from."

You can "visit a French bakery to scan the baguettes and croissants. Smile at the face of the friendliest butcher in Iowa as he shows you his best cuts of meat, before shipment to your store." Don't write off being able to smell what you buy, Popcorn writes, implying that modern technology may make "smell-e-vision" possible.

Furthermore, you insert your recipes into your computerized television set and are reminded to get the right ingredients, even be shown how to make it. Nutrition and environmental information is instantly available, tailored to your family. All is quickly selected and delivered to your door.

"While we may still 'shop' for products dressed in fancy packaging and arrayed in lush displays on our screen, the manufacturers can now supply the goods stripped of superfluous packaging," she says in the text.

The present elaborate packaging and shelf arrangements designed to snare the shopper would be obsolete and replaced by food warehouses programmed to efficiently select goods to be delivered to purchasers.

Her supermarket evolution may be 15 years down the line — what Popcorn calls the future-future — instead of five, she writes, but "it's where we're headed."

Those prognostications are sometimes met with steely silence by food manufacturers and food marketers who acknowledge that the industry is changing, but are reluctant to accept a total metamorphosis.

"It will never happen," said one chain operator, who asked not to be named. "People want to squeeze the fruit. They like the smell of the store. They enjoy the shopping experience and we're making it more comfortable for them."

"The industry is rapidly evolving," said Tim Hammonds, senior vice president of research and education for the Food Marketing Institute, a national organization of the supermarket industry based in Washington, D.C. Although he avoided addressing Popcorn's predictions directly, he said, "We're in the midst of some fundamental changes."

In a recent Food Marketing Institute press conference in Chicago, he said supermarket retailers were focusing on expanding the kinds of products offered, including health and beauty aids, using more in-store promotions and experimenting with electronic advertising, coupons and other ways to attract customers. "What you see now in the marketplace is tremendous experimentation, but someone is going to get it right."

In a recent interview, Popcorn reiterated her thinking about the demise of supermarkets as we know them:

"If anything, it's happening in spades. We've been talking to the chains, and business is really off. They've created a very uncomfortable, inaccessible atmosphere. . . ! The price clubs (warehouse stores and discount supermarkets) are killing them."

Regarding the food industry's reluctance to consider her assessment of it, she said, "That's why it's never an American company that does it. That's why there's always a foreign company that hasn't been doing business the same way that comes in and makes the changes that work."

What does she see for food itself in the future?

Not only will foods be customized to benefit us in particularly healthful ways, but foods will be designed to fit our moods: "To wake you up, calm you down, give you courage, restore your sense of humor," she said. More exotic fruits, vegetables and foreign cuisines will stimulate our fantasies while being marketed in safe forms.

"Look for meat, fish and poultry tagged with their growing history: where they were raised (including soil and water conditions), what they were fed, how they were treated. Laboratory environments may soon be the only guaranteed pure sources."

One significant prediction that Popcorn mentions in her book is that "for advertisers to survive in years to come, they'll have to switch allegiances and change over to the consumer's side. The new partnership will be (ad) agency and consumer joining together to glean truth from the client," i.e. the manufacturer.

Part of Popcorn's method is to establish her set of basic trends that serve as almost religious tenets. Given those principles, any ideas, business practices or products can be analyzed. Her rule of thumb is that to be successful, an idea or product or service must conform to at least four of her basic trends — and present-day supermarkets do not.

If this is the way her consulting business functions, why reveal all these secrets in a book for anyone to read?

"What we do is put it into action," Popcorn said. "Anybody can know it; we sell what to do with it. What our business sells is the application. How to apply it is the hard part."

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